

Did You Know....?

By Clem Dougherty

Did You Know...that in 1769, at the time of the Sacred Expedition's entry into California, the numerous Native American tribes occupying California could not communicate with one another? Yes it's true. The exact number of Native Americans occupying California at that time is not known due to a lack of any reliable historical census existing at the time. Estimates vary. The most common estimate is that there were approximately 300,000 Native American people living in California in 1769 (see Rawls and Bean, California, An Interpretive History, 9th ed., p.14). In addition, there was no common political unit holding the 300,000 Native Americans together. Instead, the Native Americans in California were deeply divided.

One of the major factors in dividing the 300,000 Native Americans was language. There was no one basic language stock. How many basic language stocks were there? Historians don't agree. The historians Rawls and Bean state that there were five main language stocks which were then subdivided into 21 language families which in turn were subdivided into at least 100 mutually unintelligible languages.(see Rawls and Bean, California, An Interpretive History, 9th ed.; p. 16) The historian James A. Sandos states that there were six main linguistic stocks covering 64 to 80 different mutually unintelligible languages which were further subdivided into dialects many of which were also mutually unintelligible.(see Sandos, Converting California, Indians and Franciscans in the Missions, p.15). In any event the Native American tribes had no common language between and among them. As a result mutually unintelligible languages were the norm and fostered division rather than unity among the Native Americans in California in 1769.



Another factor creating division among the Native Americans in California was the fact that with a few exceptions and subject to some modification, the tribes lived a

hunter/gatherer existence and not a farming one. The California tribes were unlike the Indians in the American East living in settled towns, or the buffalo dependent, horse riding tribes of the American Plains, or the settled, farming tribes of the American Southwest. The California Native Americans survived on what they could get from the land whether that be deer, duck, quail, fish or acorns, berries, and other plants gathered from the land. The availability of such natural resources then determined how many people could reside together in one place at any given time. As a result by 1769 the natural resources so available supported approximately 100 basic tribes which were further divided into tribelets. The tribelets could consist of a single village but could also include a group of neighboring villages with a principal village and three or four smaller ones joining together. Tribelet populations ranged from several hundred to several thousand individuals depending upon the availability of natural resources to support the number of people in a particular area. (see Rawls and Bean, California, An Interpretive History, 9th ed., p. 16) As a result the basic living patterns of the Native Americans, so dependent on the natural resources available for their survival, fostered division rather than unity among them.

While language and available natural resources fostered division, there were some characteristics common to all the Native Americans. Men ordinarily wore no clothing. Women wore a skirt covering the genital area down to the knee. When the weather got cold, both sexes donned blankets and robes made of animal fur. The Native Americans generally built dwellings in the shape of a cone with poles holding walls made of bark from trees or brush. In each village there was usually a sweat house available for men only. Here the men gathered around a fire, and as the sweat house filled with smoke, the men lay on the floor allowing their bodies to perspire greatly. When their bodies became sufficiently heated, they would rush from the sweat house and plunge into a nearby stream or lake. This was done to keep clean. Women and children usually bathed in less dramatic ways. The family was the basic social unit, and the Native Americans generally were monogamous with commitments being made between the two parties for life. While some tribes expressed belief in one deity or several deities, there seemed to be a common belief in all tribes that all of nature including humans was interconnected so that the humans bore a special connection with the animals and plant life around them. A spiritual power penetrated all creation and held it together. Native Americans showed respect and acknowledged that common spiritual power by following detailed rituals when they killed an animal or drank from a spring or gathered acorns and plants for survival. (see Rawls and Bean, California, An Interpretive History, 9th ed., pp.19-20). It is easy to see how the Native American concept of a spiritual power holding together and penetrating both man and nature would conflict with the traditional Judeo/Christian view of both God and man being separate and apart from the rest of nature.

The stage was thus set for a major culture clash between the Native Americans and the Spanish missionaries.

(Sources: Rawls and Bean, California, An Interpretive History, 9th ed., pp. 14,16,18,20,52; Sandos, James A., Converting California, Indians and Franciscans in the Missions, p.15, 17-20. For an eyewitness account of the Native Americans in California in 1846-1847 confirming much of the information above, see Bryant, Edwin, What I Saw in California, (edition printed May, 1985, pp. 265-274).